

Brendan Croker, singer, songwriter and guitarist who worked with Mark Knopfler in the Notting Hillbillies – obituary

He once avoided a knife-fight in a Mexican cantina by picking up a guitar and playing songs by Hank Williams and Jim Reeves

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Brendan Croker in 1988

Brendan Croker, who has died aged 70, was a guitarist and songwriter who – unlike his collaborators such as Mark Knopfler, Eric Clapton and Chet Atkins – never achieved the kind of global recognition which his extraordinary talent might have brought him.

The term maverick might have been invented for Croker, whose singing voice, with its affecting combination of roughness and sensitivity, resonated closely with his character. The sight of the Yorkshire-born artist, with his shaven head, diamond ear-studs and heavily tattooed forearms, could inspire a degree of foreboding in people who did not know him, and in some who did. His appearance belied a fundamentally kind and thoughtful disposition: his friends included a Cambridge professor in Latin American studies, and writers including the dramatist Trevor Griffiths.

Among his notable achievements, Croker wrote the song What It Takes for the American country star Wynonna Judd, which sold four million copies; in addition, as he used to relate with equal if not more pride, how he held for more than two years the record for having run up the largest bar bill at Le Meridien in Barcelona.

In the mid-1990s a journalist from The Independent accompanied Croker on a stag party which visited a cantina in a small town on the outskirts of Mexico City, where

initially playful badinage with locals deteriorated to the point that the visitors' Spanish guide began to interpret phrases such as "knife-fight".

Croker picked up an acoustic guitar which was propped against the wall, and sang Hank Williams's *Your Cheatin' Heart* and the Jim Reeves song *He'll Have to Go* – at which point, the reporter noted, the expression on the faces of the regulars changed from one of "psychotic loathing to a kind of transfixed awe". The barman pressed an unsolicited packet of hashish into the singer's hand on the way out. "I'm very glad we went in there," Croker said. "Mexico: what a fine country. What a busy people."

Brendan Croker was 30 before he began recording seriously with his first group, the Five o'Clock Shadows. He began his musical career playing in small venues in Leeds with Mark Knopfler – who was then completing a degree at Leeds University – and their mentor, the guitar virtuoso Steve Phillips, who would join them in the 1990s in the Notting Hillbillies, a side-project for Knopfler, who had by that time achieved international stardom through his work with Dire Straits and as a solo artist.

At one Notting Hillbillies' concert at Ronnie Scott's, Knopfler, wearing a hand-stitched grey silk shirt, introduced a number as "one of my songs that just about everybody's recorded". Everybody, Mark?" Croker interrupted. "Who's sung it then? Dame Thora Hird? Archbishop Tutu?"



Croker with Mark Knopfler

Brendan Christopher Croker was born in Bradford on August 15 1953, the son of Michael, a warehouseman and former army sergeant, and Eileen, a mill-worker. His mother told him that, when he was two, he had been able to sing Doris Day's classic, *The Deadwood Stage* in its entirety but struggled to speak in coherent sentences.

Croker graduated from Bradford College of Art, after which he took various jobs: he was a dustbin man in Sheffield, and a railway guard in Leeds. "One of my favourite songs," he said, "is the single by Johnny Paycheck, *Take This Job and Shove it: I Ain't Working Here No More*. He served briefly at the Yorkshire Electricity Board ("that was a good sacking.") He was working as a painter at Leeds Playhouse when he met his lifelong partner, the set-designer Ali Allen.

His long-term ally, the broadcaster Andy Kershaw, first saw Brendan Croker, Knopfler and Phillips playing country blues in a pub called the Pack Horse, opposite Leeds University. Croker, Kershaw said, is “a world-class songwriter and just a tremendous singer. I always thought of him as a kind of British Ry Cooder. His is one of those rare voices that sounds almost black; you could have been listening to something from Muscle Shoals, Alabama in 1969, rather than Headingley, Leeds, in 1979.”

Just as the Five o’Clock Shadows were achieving serious recognition and playing larger venues in Britain, Croker, whose entire career was distinguished by what some would regard as a perverse indifference to fame, dissolved the group and moved to Nashville.

That, his former manager Paul Crockford explained, should have been the start of an incrementally prosperous career.

“He felt the whole idea of being a guitar hero was slightly absurd,” Crockford said. “The idea is that you move to Nashville and write a song that goes platinum. He did that. He worked with Chet Atkins. But Brendan was wilful. As soon as something was going quite nicely, he would start to lose interest. He was easily bored.” If Croker was richer, his former manager said, “he’d be eccentric, but he’s poor, so he’s mad.”

The singer, as though eager to dispel any notion that his ambition was in any way linked with affluence, left Tennessee and embarked on a pro bono tour of Belgian prisons. He returned to England and released solo albums, including the magnificently titled *Redneck State of the Art*.



Croker in 2002

By the early 2000s, still based in Kirkstall, Leeds, he was playing smaller venues with intriguing and well-received one-man shows such as *Which Part of No Is it That You Don’t Understand?*, for which he asked friends around Europe to vote for their favourite protest songs, each of which was assigned a number between one and 40.

The audience was invited to call out numbers, which might result in him playing Over the Hills and Far Away or his definitive version of The Blue Line, Knopfler's song about the police charge at Orgreave in 1984 during the miner's strike.

In 2001 he recorded an album called Life Is Almost Wonderful with the Derby-born painter and singer Kevin Coyne (the two had met in a hotel breakfast lounge in Bruges, after Coyne overheard the Yorkshireman informing the waiter that it was "wrong on every level" to serve cheese at that hour of the morning).

One of Croker's contributions, a duet called We Don't Know Each Other At All, had a laconic, self-deprecating wit that could have dated back to the classic period of British music hall. ("I think you're sexy/ You think I'm chic/ We don't know each other at all.")

In the last years of his life, the singer, who was hampered increasingly by lower-back pain, and had always had an affection for what he referred to, in one of his album titles, as The Great Indoors, increasingly restricted his appearances to venues in Leeds and Belgium. For a while Croker, a man who once suggested that his epitaph might read: "He Was Headstrong, But He Meant Well", looked after a shire horse called Bob. "I like him," the singer said, "because he doesn't do anything he doesn't want to do."

One of his later solo shows was called Dying to Sing, in which he performed a set restricted to the work of dead artists including Kurt Cobain, Bob Marley and Vivian Stanshall. The idea, he told an interviewer, came to him after he had been talking about the singer Ricky Nelson who died when he blew his own plane up, the result (according to unconfirmed rumours) of his having contravened orthodox safety procedure by freebasing cocaine while landing.

He was fascinated by such characters, Croker explained, "because they made other people's lives better, very often at the expense of their own. And what else is art supposed to be about?"

Brendan Croker is survived by his partner Ali Allen.

Brendan Croker, born August 15 1953, died September 10 2023